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WEB OF FAMILY TIES

593 With the setting up of an independent houshold the nature of husband-wife relations undergoes a definite change. Now the two are free to run their own affairs. No doubt the husband has not now to work under anybody's supervision, but he also lacks the security provided by the joint family. Similarly, the wife has no longer to slave for her mother-in-law, but all the same she has to do the entire work connected with the running of the household. The husband is now the real head and has to work hard to provide for the maintenance of the family. The major share of the family's subsistence comes through his labour; in some cases the wife also assists him. In many families, a small part of the family's earnings may be contributed by the wife also. But the main task of the woman is to run the household and manage the domestic economy. As far as possible the house should be kept neat and tidy, children and cattle should be well looked after, and above all at fixed hours meals should be provided for the members of the family. Ordinarily a woman does not interfere with 'outside affairs', that is matters not directly connected with domestic management are believed to be the responsibility of the husband. Similarly, the husband is not expected to meddle too much in the actual running of the household. Nevertheless, major decisions connected with either of these spheres are arrived at after mutual consultation. Cases on record clearly show that in several instances a dominating wife effectively interferes in the management of 'outside affairs', and in time the husband learns not only to take her advice but to depend upon it. On the other hand, instances of the other type are not wanting, where a wife who is consistently negligent about her household duties is sharply rebuked by her husband and is made to carry out his detailed instructions regarding the actual management of domestic affairs. Care and education of the children are primarily the responsibility of the mother, but in this field the father is also expected to give some of his time and attention.

593 837 Both husband and wife watch each other's activities closely. Improvidence and spendthrift habits, excessive drinking and gambling, and extra-marital sex-intrigues to the neglect of the spouse on the part of the husband are critically watched and commented on by the wife. If mild hints do not prove effective she takes recourse to taunts and threats. One of the most important and often-used weapons in the armoury of the wife is her threat

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of running away to her parental home. She often expresses her anger and discontent by neglecting the children and other household activities. If things still do not improve to her satisfaction, she begins to protest loudly, which often ends in open quarrels and altercations. On the other hand, among the men the stereotype that by nature woman is faithless is widely believed, and while they admit that there are some notable exceptions, they nevertheless emphasize the necessity of vigilance on the part of the husband and other responsible members of the family. The suspicion regarding a woman is directed particularly against two things: namely, possibility of a sexual liaison with a 'lover', and that of her stealthily giving money and grain to her relatives on the paternal side. If he suspects his wife, the husband makes suggestive hints and veiled threats. When subsequent events confirm his suspicion, he voices his protests loudly. Now he administers threats of dire consequences, and as a foretaste of what would come if she does not change her ways, he may even beat his wife. If things do not change for the better even with this, the subsequent developments may indeed be very complicated. However, much depends on the personality and disposition of the husband. Rather than allowing the affair to develop into an open scandal, some husbands overlook occasional lapses of their wives; others are so jealous that they cannot forget an incident of this type even when the wives mend their ways and keep on taunting them.

In a joint family, the daughter-in-law does not have any independence unless she becomes the mother of two or three children. Until then she should not be found even speaking to her husband. Efforts at endearment, smiling or even exchanging fond glances would be enough to cause comment and would earn for the couple a reputation for being 'shameless'. The husband in such families often hears the complaints from both his mother and his wife, and leaves them to adjust their relations among themselves.

In the preceding section I have discussed the ethics and ideals of family organization on the three levels of village population. The authoritarian husband and the docile wife is the ideal of people on all three levels, but it is only on the upper level that we find them holding to the ideal in actual practice. Even there, the desire to maintain 'family prestige' and 'good name' forces the husband to overlook some of the faults and failings of the wife and

593 565 937 [586] to maintain silence about them. But if affairs cross the limits of decency, or the constant misbehaviour of the wife threatens to become the subject of public gossip, the wife receives very harsh treatment and may even be driven out of the house. If she once leaves the house, readmittance for her would be practically impossible among the people of the upper level. On the other two levels, while tempers are roused very quickly and are even expressed publicly in a violent way, the reconciliation is not difficult. Faults of the wife are often openly discussed among them, and she is ridiculed in the presence of others; but she is quite readily forgiven also, and if she does not go astray again, she soon regains her former position in the household.

593 The stereotyped attitudes of wives for husbands and of husbands for wives are common for the community—as a whole. 'A woman should not be trusted. You can never tell when and how she would slip out', say the men in a knowing manner. Others add, 'Much depends on the husband. He must control his wife properly. Once he relaxes his control, then she is practically gone for all times.' The women, on the other hand, regard all men as heartless. 'It is impossible to please a husband; to-day he likes a thing very much; to-morrow he will lose his temper over it.' 'The lot of a woman is difficult. Unlucky ones receive beatings every day; the lucky ones get them only periodically. But is there a woman whose husband never beats her?' In a philosophical vein they add, 'And why not? The man works and earns. If we do not please him he beats us. Of what use are our protests? If a bullock runs away from one owner, will not its second master yoke it to a plough and mercilessly goad it to move faster? If we leave one man and go to another, what guarantee is there that he will not treat us in the same way?'

The wife does not dominate the domestic scene, but if she is tactful she can manipulate things in such a way that her husband will rarely go against her wishes. Gradually she comes to occupy a key position within the household.

581 Finally two significant questions may be raised: what type of wives do most men want? and what type of husbands do most women want? While the ideals and likes and dislikes of individuals are bound to differ greatly on the basis of their personal equations, certain attributes are considered desirable by people from nearly all the different levels of the community. A wife should be, above

all, of a pleasant disposition, and should endeavour to keep her husband pleased. She must be 'tactful' and should be able to 'dissuade the husband from going the wrong way' without causing offence to him. This tact would be a valuable asset to her in organizing her general relations with the other members of the family. 'Foolish wives grumble and cry, and go on slaving for the household; the intelligent one wins over everyone by her pleasantness.' Then the wife must be a good housekeeper and a tolerable cook. Her economic virtues would ultimately earn for her the key position in the family. She must spend the money entrusted to her care very judiciously. She should save enough to buy her ornaments; and should lay aside something to meet unforeseen expenses. The more she can save without the knowledge of her husband, the more she will be appreciated by the elderly women. In sex she should not be passive, but should not be violently active either. 'We don't want a woman to be like a log of wood in the bed; but the aggressive ones definitely repel us', the men often remark. The women also comment on oversexed women who are shameless enough to cross the limits of womanly decency. Husbands do not want their wives to be fussy. The womenfolk seem to be well aware of this. In the words of one of our informants, 'If we nag too much, our words lose their value and our husbands make it a habit not to listen to whatever we say.'

Women's 'ideal' of a husband is a man who 'works hard and earns enough' to feed and keep the family in good clothes. If he can buy ornaments for the wife, he will be all the more admired. He should 'take an interest in his wife and children', and look to their comfort and welfare. While the women take it for granted that no husband is ever completely faithful to his wife, they resent their semi-permanent or permanent affiliations to a woman outside. They protest if his amours prove too expensive to the family. No woman would like her husband to earn the epithet of being 'a woman's slave', but neither do they want him to be overstrict and temperamental. The suggestion that a husband could be meek and docile appeared rather ridiculous to most women; what they seemed to like best was a firm, but friendly husband. A man not given to any excesses and possessing personality-traits which mark him out in the community in some way would certainly be an object of pride for his wife.